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The gentrification of Elie

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ELIE'S GENTRIFICATION...

Elie has become a virtual English public school, by the sea. It would not surprise me if I saw a Harrow boater in the street. In the habitus of its very affluent homeowners and the mannerly deliberateness of their children's diligent pursuit of structured leisure which they share with the Edwardian upper-middle-classes you see and hear its symbolism of entitlement. Elie offers advantageous networking opportunities to parents and children. Its homogenous class profile ensures risks are reduced through 'contamination' by mixing below one's perceived standing. Dogs are now permitted on the beach as everyone carries a poo bag. It is in places such as Elie that the explanation for the Scottish education "attainment gap" is to be found as its opportunity hoarding impedes the social mobility of the working-class child. Parents sense of security for this choice of family holiday extends beyond mere physical parameters to include class. Elites are being culturally constituted through the affordances of Elie's day life in this quasi-rural enclave encountering new patterns of settlement, not touristic, but neither is this settlement traditional.

The range of accents on the beach and taking sailing lessons excludes the majority in society. Elie is ideal for developing and solidifying social capital networks. Gentrification scholarship in focussing upon New York and London has overlooked small, apparently unprepossessing, places which have also become wrapped in its tightly woven exclusive class fabric. The class frequently Elie has 'rediscovered' the simplicity of a staycation, but this finding comes at a deep and enduring loss through social displacement of those living on the national average salary.

In 1964 Ruth Glass coined the term 'gentrification' in her book *London: Aspects of Change* noting that the social aspects of neighbourhoods were being 'uplifted' as the middle-class or 'gentry' took up residence in working-class space and pressing for improvements. This inward migration into communities lacking in economic capital reflected, she argued, rising costs of commuting and home owning become an investment with expected returns for the property at the right time in the future. Gentrification overlaps with commodification and the absence of industry in the locality except labour conducted mentally through the

Internet. These buyers valued their property less as a family home and more as a place of temporary residence. A place to 'do up' and sell on at the right time. That individualism cascaded across streets as these new residents behaved in a socially distant way from the more intimate and chatty historic custom of the area. Baron Haussmann demolition of the working-class neighbourhoods of Paris in the nineteenth century introduced not only wealthy tree lined boulevards, but also upper-middle class residents. In San Francisco gentrification is known through the label red-brick chic. Perhaps in Elie the label purposeful play is apposite.

Instead of eye contact it was heads down. Rather than hello and a 'pointless' chat you saw people checking their wristwatches more during these increasingly wooden exchanges. The global now meets the local on Elie sands: as our children played making a sandcastle another little boy took an interest. I began chatting with his dad who turned out to be a pilot with Cathay Pacific and lived in Dubai. He was scheduled to fly a triple 777 the next day from there to Seattle. Like most on that beach the week's rent for his holiday house was just over £1,000, down the coast in Lower Largo it would be around £300. Location defines the gentry and prices reflect this global market which 'hires' lots of Elie for about two months every summer. The displacement of local working-class children ensures a consistency of social life for the children of incomers and other more temporary residents. The underlying process is a form of 'class cleansing' which is taking place elsewhere including in London on its larger canvas.

As house prices rose greatly in Elie in Fife residents of Fife and their extended families had become rapidly displaced by the incoming gentry. For many the Elie home was a third property. It earned its keep through holiday letting and at peak times in the summer several generations of gentry took up residence. By this time the local economy had collapsed. These families able to afford the price of £450,000 for a 3-bedroom house shopped online. Tesco vans can be seen making deliveries at all times of the day in Earls Ferry. Privately educated children dash very purposefully about everywhere on their mountain bikes with mobile phone to hand to play. The Christian Union runs daily events on the beach. I passed groups of energetic teenagers with Home Counties English accents dressed to a pirate theme moving on mass to begin playing structured educational activities directed by authoritative adults.

Two deaths unexplained occurred of adults in Elie earlier this year, but this unusual tragic occurrence took place off this gentry stage in the confined area of social housing and so it posed no threat to the mobile incomer nor would they see it as impinging on them socially. In gentrification social distance no longer has much in common with physical proximity in the same now upscaled village. Although the first textbook on gentrification was published in 2007 I personally witnessed this process beginning in 1987 in Elie which is exceptional among the other villages along the East Neuk coastline, although if the cost of fish & chips is a valid sociological indicator then gentrification is rearing its ugly head in St. Monans where I declined a supper at a cost of £15.

The traditional working-class street, Lamont Drive, in St. Andrews up the coast has fewer local Scottish residents nowadays as many have moved on having sold their former council homes at a tidy profit to incomers associated with the University which is increasingly not a Scottish institution. It has contributed to St. Andrew's town gentrification. Following a member of the royal family's (celebrity) period of study there it now attracts a very high number of North American and Chinese students. Social displacement is being felt in specific areas of gentrification. I've found that I can identify gentrification through ethnographic observations of daily life, walking speed, intense purposive eye gaze, reluctance to commit to eye contact and family as pack movement across the social spaces of the Pavilion hosting tennis and golf, or by the flourishing Elie Water Sports where 'dangerous' and expensive water based activities develop the moral fibre of the next business and political leadership class.

Scholars of gentrification are interested in the 'locational seesaw' of capital as it moves around looking for somewhere to invest it. Buying a place in Elie is not unlike purchasing a painting at Sotheby's hoping, that besides its value as a conversational dropper, it will increase its value in due course. The social reproduction potential that Elie offers these new residents will outlast the happiness gained from playing on the beach or chatting at a table outside the Pavilion. Those opportunities ensure that the next generation can indulge in exactly this class honoured way. Elie will continue into the foreseeable future as a place of merriment and social distinction. The mention of Elie at the Boat Race or at Royal Ascot will reliably indicate that you are one of us. The mention of Elie might

even feature, without irony, in the Oxbridge entrance interview about the sociology of gentrification, and opportunity hoarding as well.

END

Prof Chris Holligan, UWS.

1200 WORDS -approx